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Sole of Gender, Equality and Power in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Abstract: The concept of globalization, gender equality and women empowerment have become widely discussed issues in the field of research and public debate amongst the academicians in the modern age. Shashi Deshpande has emerged as one of the true female voices of Indian Writings in English. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) deals with the major issues of gender-bias and women's empowerment. In the novel, Sarita the major female character survives in a man-made society, which is full of different kinds of bias and superstitions. Being a woman of strong thoughts and power, she becomes an independent doctor; in spite of this, she is unable to escape from the past and suffers in her life not only physically, but mentally and intellectually also. This paper is an attempt to discuss the major points regarding gender bias, gender equality, patriarchal-ideology, women empowerment and human superstitions discussed in the novel broadly.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Power, Women empowerment, feminism, globalization

The question is what gender equality, gender bias and power politics are? The term gender is probably related to biological aspects; it may be male, female, third gender called 'hijras', but with the advancement of feminists and feminist theories, the idea that gender is a social construction, has established among the critics. Reasons are, one is born as an individual and no psychological or physical reasons are to be found behind these stereotypes regarding superiority/inferiority, mind/body, self/other etc. The great treatise written in French in 1949 and translated into English in 1953 titled as *The Second Sex* provides a route of self-discovery or identity to literary scholars or readers of society. This treatise, written in the light of existentialist theory has created sensation regarding equality and power, not only among the feminist critics, but readers also. The second wave of feminism has begun to raise the slogan 'Equal pay for equal work' and the 1963 book *The Feminist Mystique* of Betty Friedan aims at to put before the society the inequality and sufferings of American housewives of 1950s. Gender Equality refers to the equal status of male or female, or any gender in major areas including education, labour, employment, politics or anywhere. The power is also a huge concept concerning human power or male power, related to patriarchy (rule by male member) or matriarchy (rule by female member). When Englishmen came to India, they made their own language a powerful tool to establish their power on Indian and succeeded to a large extent. In this globalized area; the terms like gender, equality and power are debatable concepts. Gender equality and empowerment of women are the major procedural concerns, which address towards the human rights and development of not only of women, but human beings of entire society also. In India, there are major gender-related issues and concepts, like patriarchy, gender bias, women-suppression and subjugation, marriage, divorce and

sexual-violence. It is a human nature, when a lot of cruelties and tyrannies are crossing their limits, it's very common to break silence and oppressed against the practices of human-beings or society.

In this era of secularism and globalization, the term gender equality and women empowerment have become the most important factors, in transforming the status of women and upcoming generation, and making our society more civilized, economically strong and well-established. For erasing the gap between both male and female and providing the equal rights to human being, especially women, in area of education, law, politics and other intuitions, in India, many stalwart figures as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Henry Vivian Derozio, Swami Vivekananda and others have come and many other movements as Shakers, the Suffrage movement and Indian Feminism have become the earliest practitioners regarding gender equality and empowerment of women. Many writers of not only the East but the West also as John Stuart Mill, John Locke, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir have used literature as a powerful instrument and have done great efforts to arouse consciousness by their creative writings. Through the Fourth-wave feminism the attempt was to show the various misconduct of human behaviour including sexual harassment at workplace or street, violence and rape through great arts like social-media, especially Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and blogs such as Feministing. According to Malashri Lal "Women's studies is considered to be more acceptable term for examining gender issues" (15). Elaine Showalter has stated in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977): "We need to see woman novelist against the backdrop of the women of her time as well as in relation to other writers in history" (16).

Shashi Deshpande, one of the major true female voices of Indian Writings in English has raised the issues regarding gender, includes sexism, discrimination, caste, chastity, menstruation,

family-honor, marriage and dowry. *The Dark Holds No Terror* was published in 1980. Stated by the novelist 'the one most dear to her' and also cited from American feminist Betty Friedan who says: "It was easier for her to start the women's liberation movement than to change her own personal life" (107). The plot of the novel is probably taken from her major short-story 'Liberated Woman'. Considered by the novelist 'a serious novel about a serious human predicament' and never intends to write as a woman's novel. In words of Deshpande "It was difficult to write, it was different from other novels I had read written by Indian writers...but all the reviews that came spoke of it as a novel about a woman, a middle class woman, a professional woman etc. In effect, a novel about a woman" (24).

This novel is based on the past memories of the protagonist named Sarita. Implying of flashback technique and use of myths like Krishna-Sudama story from the *Mahabharata* makes the novel more interesting and complex. Sarita is born in a high caste Hindu Brahmin family, survives for being a girl child in her own family. She is elder to her brother Dhruva. Both children live happily, as a girl child, Sarita has to follow some rules and tradition, but the most unfortunate moment of her life is, she goes in the night with his brother, who is drowned in the river and she cannot save his life. This event becomes a bad or tormenting memory of her life. When she returns her own home, the words of her own mother "You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?"(191) are unforgettable. A woman of self-determination and ambition, she decides to establish her career in medical field and promising to her father, she will adjust in hostel, what money he will send. By her efforts and hard-working, she becomes an MBBS doctor. No doubt she lives with her parents, but lacks love and affection from childhood; it becomes the reason that she attracts toward Manu, who is a college lecturer and a boy from lower caste family, whose father has a cycle's shop. Often they fall in love with

each-other and Saru marries to him against the wishes of parents. She tries to get love from Manu and they have two children named Renu and Abhi. Such a family in Indian society is called a happy family. Here the struggle of her life does not finish, somehow once they (Saru and Manu) go to Ooty for holidays. Wife of Manu's friend jokes: "If you had married a doctor, you'd have gone to Ooty too" (111). Somehow such a joke hurts the manhood of Manu. He tries to take revenge of this, by making hurting remark to Saru in the nightmare. She cannot reply or say anything thinking children will awake. Hearing the death of her mother she comes to her maternal home, but it is also supposed that she tries to go away from Manu's behavior thrust upon her in the night which has become a fierce dream of her life and cannot be forgotten.

Here no doubt patriarchy or male-power wins, this is not the victory of male towards female, but humanity somehow seems to be diminished. Women's movement of 1960s was started against these thoughts and stereotypes and provided voices to women in all area of life. The famous critic like Sangeeta Sharma is of the view that sex is determined by God, but gender is providing of patriarchal ideology. Studies regarding gender issues aims at enhance consciousness to women towards their victimization in male-dominated society. Biased or reserved attitude of parents towards their children is one of major subject-matter in the novel. This novel can be categorized as a novel of major gender-oriented issues. The story of the novel revolves around Sarita, a lady doctor who suffered in her childhood because of genetic belief of society. After marriage to Manu, she is subjugated by her own husband in nightmare. Though after a long period, Sarita returns in her own maternal house, but there is a kind of wave in her heart and she asserts: "Why had it seemed so important to come here, and, at once?"(17). Here it is observed that Sarita tries to forget violent memories of her past, but constantly suffers internally as a surviving human being. In spite of living in her home, she feels like a refugee. The

memories of her mother and brother Dhruva interrupt her mind unintentionally. The question also arises here; is it possible for Sarita to be free herself from past and relationship. The answer is not very positive because it is not very easy to forget from reality and past. We can ignore, but not remove the footprints of the past.

In India, patriarchy has its origin from ancient time. Basically patriarchy refers to the rule and power of male member in family. Patriarchy and man-made social system are considered to be the major reason for the pitiable condition of women, but what is the role of a woman herself behind the sufferings of girls, cannot be avoided. In the novel, Sarita suffers entirely her life because of old-fashioned attitude, which is thrust upon her by her own mother. The word disinherited is applicable not only in case of son, but daughter as well. As the word disinherited comes in the mind of Saru, she tries to deny this word intellectually from her mind, yet she realizes: "I died long before I left home" (32).

This novel shows different points of view of the novelist regarding patriarchy; she has not attacked patriarchy, but opines that matriarchy or female member of family plays major role behind the pitiable condition of girl child. Sarita suffers her whole life because of the words and behaviour of her own mother, somehow her father has always supported her. So we cannot blame patriarchy only. Somehow, prevalent reserved attitudes of father towards son and mother towards daughter are major reasons that Sarita feels alone internally her entire life. At the end of the novel it is also observed that Sarita breaks her silence and discusses the cruelties of her husband to her father. This fact can be disclosed through these statements between Sarita and his father: "Does it shock you to hear such a things? I know you're my father and I'm your daughter and there is nearly thirty years between us, but still... you are a man and I'm a woman. Can we talk of such things?" (199) Here we find lack of communication between family members, as

Saru's father exclaims: "Silence had become a habit for us. Now ... go on, tell me. Tell me everything" (199).

In case of gender equality, Deshpande thinks like a contemporary and open-minded woman. Though she has never suggested their woman characters to be free from relationship, but she always suggested that like other novels, this novel also deals with the long way of silence of women throughout her life. Though backache, leucorrhea, menorrhagea and loss of appetite are the indignities of women's life, for that they never want to complain and try to keep secret. Even in the present time, women want to break all kinds of silence to achieve freedom in their lives. Human predicament is the major theme in the novel. In the eyes of Saru's mother (Kamala), there is a kind of hard glitter, the shine of unshed tears. Its main reason is that on the one hand she is being caught herself in conservative and genetic thoughts and on the other hand what she has expected to her daughter Saru, she never gets. Though Saru marries against the wishes of her parents and leaves the broken heart of her parents. As her mother expresses her grief and anger towards her at the time of her death: "What daughter? I have no daughter" (109). The death of Dhruva has given her sorrow for lifetime, whose supply cannot be done. To go away of Saru, against her mother for fulfillment of her ambition to become a doctor and marry to a lower class boy named Manohar are the reasons behind the anger of her mother. We cannot blame patriarchy, but matriarchy (in which all the roles are played by mother) is also responsible.

Moreover, the novelist has tried to clear in mind that no partnership can be equal; even if a woman wants to be a happy marriage, she will have to follow some rules made by society. By conjoining ancient and rational way of thinking, Deshpande has put before us liberal and contemporary points of view of educated, yet conservative society. In ancient time, Sita and Draupadi surrendered voluntarily and consciously abandoned: "And what, in the long run,

matters more than survival” (138). Women characters of Deshpande’s novels particularly belong to middle class, but they have great desire and contemporary thinking. Sarita’s father belongs to a middle class family and Sarita knows the fact that her father can provide her a good education; but to provide all the luxuries are not possible for him. As he asserts: “You know my salary is not very much. Oh yes, I can pay your fees and for your books and hostel...but nothing more. No luxuries. You’ll have to manage with whatever I send” (143). On which Sarita replies voluntarily: “Yes, Baba, I can manage” (143).

In this changing scenario, education has played a great role behind the empowerment of women and gender equality; feminists have made literary works powerful source for awakening consciousness among readers as well as society. In the present era of globalization, girls prefer career than marriage. Sarita, knowing the condition of her father, chooses to be educated and it seems that it is her victory, but the voices of her mother “She killed her brother. She killed her brother” (145) still remains in her mind, and being suffered by the inequality and partiality of her mother, when Sarita holds her daughter Renu in her arms, feels an immense fear, not love. As she imagines: “Could she measure up to all that this being, so wholly dependent on her, would expect of her? Would she not fail her as her own mother had failed her?”(162). Here we find the gap between two generations. Sarita maintains her mind that she will not do any injustice to her daughter, as her mother has done to her. Polarity between mother-daughter and human-relationship maintains throughout the novel. The view of Sarabjit K. Sandhu is also remarkable: “...the male child is considered more important than girl because he is qualified to give agni to his dead parents. The soul of dead person would otherwise wander in ferment”. (109)

Here the question also arises in mind of the readers; is Sarita’s daughter Renu satisfied by the behaviour of her mother? Somehow Renu also feels same kind of injustice between her

brother Abhijit and herself, and on her birthday party shouts on her other: “Why do you always scold me? You never scold him. You never say anything to him. It’s not fair. It’s my birthday, my presents. And he cried and spoilt everything. And now you scold me. You always scold me. It’s not fair, not fair” (173). On this, Sarita also realizes the fact that human life revolves in a circular way: “Do we travel, not in straight line, but in circles? Do we come to the same point again and again? Dhruva and I, Renu and Abhi ...is life an endless repetition of the same pattern” (173).

The major problem behind all the sufferings of women in India is that they themselves have accepted possessiveness of men. In the novel, Sarita, Smita and Nalu, called “The Three Muskeeteer” were school friends. When they began to go college, their path diverged, but they were always in touch with one another. Now Sarita and Smita are married. Smita is a dedicated housewife and mother; Sarita is also married and has two children, but combined to a well-established career, where as Nalu is spinster and dedicated to her job. Now when they have met again, their lives have become totally different from one another.

However marriage, which is called a social institution, is also a great barrier for this possessiveness of male towards female. After the marriage, the identity of Smita has changed totally. Her name is changed from Smita to Anju, by her husband. Even if someone calls her Smita, her husband hates him/her. Sarita also tries to identify herself with her mother. As V. Rao says: “..a search for her own feminine side and for the reunification of her spilt self...and finally we see rebirthing her own individual personality separate from her mother’s”(107). In a country like, India without kumkum and black beads, a woman is supposed to be not completed and these are the symbols of her womanhood. As the novelist says:

“The woman looked completely unfamiliar without her kumkum and black beads. They had been such an integral part of her that without those symbols of her wifehood, she seemed a colourless ghost” (76)

Finally Shashi Deshpande has peeped down in the psyche of male and female without any partiality. She is not pathetic towards male or female characters, but very frank about all description of characters and genetic social system of India. It is clear that Deshpande has presented her female character both from the traditional as well as contemporary points of view. As G.S. Amur remarks: “ Women’s struggle in the context of contemporary India to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and the most important of all as human being is Shashi Deshpande’s major concern as creative writer”(10).

To sum up, it can be concluded if we try to evaluate all these concepts regarding gender, power and politics; we find many assumption and reality. Through binary division things can be evaluated as right/wrong, self/other, rational/irrational, mind/body, and nation/culture. No doubt we had gone ahead from centuries ago stereotypes and adopted western culture to a large extent; the reasons behind all these changes are globalization, trans-feminism and many movements. In spite of all these arguments, the questions, debates and discussions about all these topics, will continue amongst the academician and people.

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